

Lent – Be more converted to the God of love and the love of God

Love is essential for human life. It is needed for personal development, human fulfillment and the enjoyment of life. As a popular song used to say, *Love makes the world go 'round*. And love is what God is all about. No wonder we all need God, whether we realize it or not! St. John the Apostle says that “*love is from God*” and that “*everyone who loves is born of God and knows God... whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love*.” To further emphasize where true love comes from and how much of this love is in God, he states: “*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*” And lest we forget that love is meant to be shared with one another, he adds: “*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*” (1 Jn 4:7ff)

Now, if love is what makes the world go 'round, if love is what makes us fully human and fully alive, if love is what makes us more and more like God: why do we love so poorly sometimes? Why do we neglect love? Why do we fail to *become perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect* (cf. Mt 5:48) by loving fully and loving well? In part it is due to the fact that so many of us

have not understood nor experienced fully the God of love.

Lent is the sacred time set aside each year to call all mankind to take a fresh look at the clear and unequivocal display of God's passionate and compassionate love for all humanity: Christ crucified for our sake and risen from the dead for our eternal salvation. Lent is a great time to discover fully the love of God, to ponder how much God really loves us — you, me and everyone else. How much does God love us? Rather than lose us eternally, God chose not to spare his only begotten Son, but rather delivered him into our hands to pay the price of our ransom. That's love! And he did so, not after verifying that we were worthy of such an exchange, but “*God demonstrated His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” (Rom 5:8) That's true love!

During this special moment within the liturgical year between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday we take a closer look at this supreme act of love. During these 40 days of Lent, we make a spiritual inventory to see where we stand in terms of our love of God, self and neighbor: to



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see where we are loving less than we should or more than we should, that is, withholding the love we owe God, neighbor and self, or giving more attention and affection than is due to self, others and created things. Through the time-tested practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, we refocus our attention and renew our commitment to the way of life to which Christ calls us: to a life of love — “*this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God*” (Eph 3:19) — and to life which the blessed Trinity wishes to bestow upon us: “*For of his fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace.*” (Jn 1:16)

Let us convert fully to the God of love and the love of God!

As Pope Benedict XVI stated in an Ash Wednesday homily a couple of years ago, “*Lent stimulates us to let the Word of God penetrate our life and in this way to know the fundamental truth: who we are, where we come from, where we must go, what path we must take in life... Lent, as a time of listening to the truth, is a propitious moment to be converted to love, as the profound truth — the truth of God — is, at*

the same time, love.” (General Audience, Ash Wednesday, St. Peter's Square: March 2, 2006)

Let us each allow the Lord to convert us to love. Let us each make an intentional effort to be perfected in love of God, neighbor and self. Let us make the most of this time of grace which is the Lenten season, and avail ourselves of intensified prayer, fasting and almsgiving to help us balance our lives and gain perspective.

Also, conscious of our mission in the world, let us not cease to “*proclaim the merciful love of Christ, who continues to direct his compassionate gaze to the men and peoples of all times.*” (Pope Benedict XVI) Let each of us reach out with the good news of God's never-ending love to those whom we will meet throughout the Lenten season, especially those who will visit our churches “*for their ashes,*” for Good Friday processions and services and for Easter morning Masses. Let us make the season of Lent, and the beautiful Easter season which follows, a time of personal growth and of evangelistic outreach. Our lives will be enriched as a result.

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When wisdom is wise

On Jan. 18, Pope Benedict XVI was supposed to give a talk at the opening of the new semester at La Sapienza University in Rome, invited by the university's rector. The University La Sapienza (“Wisdom”) was founded in 1303 by Pope Boniface VIII and was for six centuries a papal university. Then it became a state institution when the new country of Italy was formed.

However, the pope sent a note declining to speak because of a climate not conducive to rational discourse. A minority of faculty and students opposed the invitation to the pope. Some 60 professors signed a letter of protest saying that the pope was hostile to science and had in 1990 at a talk at La Sapienza (when he was Cardinal Ratzinger) claimed that the treatment of Galileo was reasonable and fair.

A handful of radical students took up the cry of opposition, posting banners and placards against Pope Benedict, marching in the streets, and then occupying the office of the rector for a time. They threatened to produce more demonstrations when the pope arrived on campus. In the midst of all of this, the pope sent his letter of regret.

It is interesting to see the results of this cause celebre. The rector of the university expressed his embarrassment and said he would invite the pope again in the near future. The prime minister of Italy condemned the “unacceptable



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climate” that brought the pope to cancel his talk. The deputy prime minister stated: “The attempt to silence (the pope) in a place that is a forum for study, teaching and dialogue seems inconceivable.” Politicians of all kinds spoke of the intolerance of the professors and the students. The rector of the University of Padua, where Galileo had taught, invited the pope to speak at his university. And one member of the Italian Parliament suggested that the university should change its name from “La Sapienza” to “La Ignoranza.”

Scholars soon came to the defense of the pope concerning his 1990 remarks about Galileo. The Jewish mathematician Giorgio Israel wrote that the pope's words could be understood by anyone with a minimum of attention as a defense of Galilean rationality. And the newspaper *Il Giornale* republished the whole of the 1990 speech and noted that Cardinal Ratzinger did not take as his own the position of a person he quoted who was opposed to Galileo. The main point of the 1990 speech was that religion can give valuable insights and that science sometimes has been

destructive. Great numbers of Italian papers reproduced the paper that Pope Benedict would have delivered on Jan. 18 this year — probably inducing more people to read it than if he had given it at the university according to plan.

The irony of the speech is that it speaks of the important and essential role of a university to seek truth. The pope says that the impulse in the human heart for seeking truth is what led to the formation of what we know as the university. “The interior origin of the university,” wrote the pope, “is in the desire for knowledge. Man wants truth. Socrates' self-questioning is the impulse from which the Western university was born.”

The pope goes on in his address to note that at the universities of Europe the cornerstone of studies was found in: philosophy, theology, law and medicine — all developed on the basis of reason, not magic or myth.

And Pope Benedict adds that it is reasonable for scientists to listen to religious traditions which for thousands of years have carried along ethical and moral learning deemed *reasonable* by the millions and millions who held them. As the pope wrote: “If reason becomes deaf to the great message that comes from the Christian faith and its wisdom, it will not become more reasonable but will lose courage for the truth.”

On Jan. 20, over 200,000 people



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A large crowd attends the weekly Angelus prayer by Pope Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. Tens of thousands of people thronged the Vatican Jan. 20 in a major show of support for the pope after protests led him to cancel a scheduled speech at Rome's Sapienza University.

flocked to St. Peter's Square for the pope's Angelus talk to show their support. His speech was repeatedly interrupted by applause and cries of encouragement, especially when he said that he remained dedicated to “frank and respectful dialogue between different points of view.” What

intolerance it was for faculty and students of La Sapienza to refuse even to listen to this message and to try to silence it!

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